

Belarus

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Freedom of the Press

Belarusian Translation

Belarus's media environment remained extremely restrictive in 2013. Even in the absence of major political events during the year, the government of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka continued to aggressively suppress independent voices. The authorities sustained their crackdown on opposition activists, protesters, and journalists while attempting to stave off economic deterioration, the influence of Ukraine's Euromaidan protests, pressure to move toward European integration, political meddling by the Kremlin, and the growing influence of social media among younger Belarusians.

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of the press, criticism of the president and the government is considered a criminal offense, and libel convictions can result in prison sentences or high fines. Judges, prosecutors, police officers, tax officials, and bureaucrats from the Information Ministry regularly use politicized court rulings and obscure regulations to harass independent newspapers and websites, especially those reporting on street protests and gatherings. A draconian new media law took effect in 2009, forcing all outlets to register with the Information Ministry, including domestic and international websites, which face blockage for failure to comply. The stipulation has forced many independent publications to switch to domain names based in neighboring countries. The law has also made it easier for the government to deny required accreditation and shutter outlets for coverage that does not "correspond to reality" or that "threatens the interests of the state." The measure even allows penalties against outlets for reporting statements by others—for example, by political parties or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—that "discredit the Republic of Belarus." In September 2013, the Information Ministry stripped the Minsk-based publishing house Lohvinau of its license after it published a book containing photographs that the ministry deemed "extremist." The collection showcased the results of the Belarus Press Photo 2011 photojournalism contest.

In May, the Minsk municipal prosecutor's office issued an official warning to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) journalist Aleh Hruzdilovich over an alleged violation of the Law on Mass Media, after he posted an article on the service's website that questioned whether Minsk Metro officials were prepared for another bomb attack similar to one that had killed 15 people in April 2011. The prosecutor also cited Hruzdilovich's 2012 book, *Who Blew Up the Minsk Metro?*, in which he casts doubt on the official investigation into the bombing. The probe had led to the widely criticized trial and execution of two young men in 2012. Hruzdilovich was accused of deliberately spreading misinformation about Belarus. Another warning could lead to the revocation of the reporter's official accreditation.

In an apparent effort to improve relations with its European neighbors, the government made a number of concessions during the year, most notably the release of several prominent journalists and political prisoners. In June, state security officials announced the closure of a criminal investigation into the so-called teddy bear stunt of 2012, in which hundreds of teddy bears carrying signs supporting free speech were airdropped into the capital and surrounding areas by a Swedish advertising firm. Charges against Anton Suryapin, a blogger and photojournalist who was the first to capture the incident on film, were also dropped. He had been facing up to seven years in prison for alleged complicity in an illegal border crossing. In July, a Minsk court lifted a two-year suspended sentence imposed in May 2011 on Iryna Khalip, a correspondent for Russia's *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper, for participation in protests following the

disputed presidential election in December 2010. The ruling marked the end of onerous restrictions on her freedom of travel and movement. In September, a court in the western city of Hrodna threw out a 2011 sentence against Andrzej Poczobut, a correspondent for the Warsaw daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*. He had been sentenced to three years in prison, with two years deferred, for allegedly libeling the president in a series of articles published in several independent outlets. An additional charge of libeling the president that was filed in 2012 was dropped in March 2013. The beleaguered monthly cultural magazine *ARCHE* also had criminal charges against it dropped in March. The magazine's bank accounts, which had been frozen since October 2012 over allegations of "financial irregularities," were unblocked. *ARCHE*'s registration was finally reinstated in May.

Long ignored by the government, bloggers and online journalists operated in relative freedom in Belarus until recently. However, internet penetration has increased, reaching 54 percent of the population in 2013, and the government has responded by restricting and monitoring use of the medium. At a November 2013 cabinet meeting, Deputy Minister of Information Dzmitry Shedko proposed that the most popular online news platforms be given mass media status, making them more accountable for their content under the media law. This would also allow their registration to be revoked if they are found to be in violation of the law. The state-owned telecommunications company Beltelekom, the sole internet service provider (ISP), controls all international data transfers and blocks some critical websites, while the State Security Committee (KGB) reportedly monitors internet communications and is believed to be behind the use of Trojan viruses to steal passwords from editors of critical websites. Government attempts to reduce the readership of independent news websites like Charter97.org and BelarusPartizan.org include a 2011 resolution requiring ISPs to block access to these and dozens of other sites from all state, cultural, and educational institutions. Independent news websites and social-networking platforms were subject to cyberattacks from unknown sources on several occasions during 2013. In April, BelarusPartizan.org and the website of the human rights NGO Viasna were both hacked; the same week, a distributed denial-of-service attack was launched against the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) website.

The government and its supporters continued to subject both independent and foreign media, as well as press freedom activists, to various forms of harassment and intimidation in 2013. Over the course of the year, the police detained at least 45 journalists and bloggers while they were attempting to cover protests or other political events. In April, six journalists were arrested while covering an annual march—which had been approved by the government—to commemorate the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Two of them, Radio Racyja reporters Alyaksandr Yarashevich and Henadz Barbarych, were detained for three days. Two others, Aksana Rudovich and Iryna Arakhoyskaya from the independent newspaper *Nasha Niva*, were arrested when they attempted to film plainclothes officers beating a protester. They were taken to a local police station, where officers examined their cameras and memory cards before releasing them. In October, at least 10 journalists were detained at the Minsk train station while waiting for the arrival of Pavel Sevyarynets, a political prisoner who had just been freed. The journalists were released only after Sevyarynets left the station. In November, Minsk police detained two journalists and filmmaker Volha Nikalaychyk. They were waiting near a detention center to cover the release of Yury Rubtsow, who had been arrested for refusing to take off an anti-Lukashenka t-shirt.

The government maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media, which consistently glorify Lukashenka and the benefits of a "stronger state" while vilifying the opposition. Only state media broadcast nationwide, and the content of smaller television and radio stations is tightly restricted, partly through highly secretive and politicized licensing procedures. Three independent broadcasters transmit their programming from neighboring Poland: BelSat television, Radio Racyja, and European Radio for Belarus. Authorities actively obstruct the work of their journalists, who have been refused press accreditation. In March 2013, BelSat was again denied accreditation by the Foreign Ministry. Most local independent outlets regularly practice self-censorship, especially when reporting on the family and business interests of Lukashenka and his closest allies.

Tax exemptions for state media give them a considerable advantage over private outlets. In the print sector, state-owned publications dominate. The government has barred most independent and opposition newspapers from being distributed by the state-owned postal and kiosk systems, from being printed by the state printer, and from any access to state advertising contracts or media subsidies. Independent papers are forced to sell directly from their newsrooms and use volunteers to deliver copies, but regional authorities sometimes harass and arrest the private distributors. Due to the country's deepening economic crisis, independent media have struggled with rising costs and declining advertising revenue. According to BAJ, there only are about 25 independent print periodicals covering social and political issues remaining in Belarus.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

93

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

29

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

36

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

28